

Circuit-riding judge hasn't much time to spare

Judge William D. Acey talks to Tom White with the Lewiston/Clarkston YWCA at a lunch recess before the two meet with the Domestic Violence Coalition.



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POMEROY - The judge walked into the Pomeroy diner about 8 a.m.; the two old men dressed like farmers at the first table greeted him and told him the rules had changed - coffee was no longer self-serve under the new management.

Twice a month, this is how Judge William D. Acey starts his days on the Judicial District in and for the State of Washington comprised of the Superior Courts of Asotin, Columbia and Garfield counties.

Or more simply put: how Judge Bill rides the Hell's Canyon Circuit.

As the judge describes it, the breakfast table is better than any news service - the old guys know what's happening.

There wasn't too much to tell the judge that day, but three things were put into the record: the Lincoln Continental is a hell of a good car, insurance companies will always find a way to raise rates and Bill Larson, may he rest in peace, knew everybody and could remember everything.

Acey made it to the Garfield County Courthouse chambers with a few minutes to spare.

Most of his days are sectioned into minutes. He is, according to the recent Washington Administrative Office of the Court report, the busiest judge in the state, doing the work of 1.59 full-time judges. This figure doesn't count travel time, though.

He is headquartered in Asotin County but covers the two others and fills in for Benton County so often they invited him to a courthouse ribbon cutting.

Twice a month, Acey has Law in Motion days in Garfield and Columbia counties. Imagine speed court.

From 8:30 to about 10:40 a.m. Acey did everything from sentencing a man who was on the hook for stealing a car and having a stolen gun, to get a lawyer for a grandma trying to adopt her grandchild.

Family law cases aren't easy for anyone. In tough divorces he tries to find something positive to say about each party at the end of it.

After 25 years on the bench, though, he has boiled the process down to this: "Family law isn't about winning. It's about everyone surviving the legal process."

Acey has Aceyism, and that was one of them. He has his own acronyms, too. CPRN is what kids need: consistency, predictability, routine and nurturing.

"Kids come first and everyone else second," he said.

He's the only judge in the state who gives all children a lawyer in dependency cases. To him it makes sense that when a court is deciding who a kid should live with, the kid ought to have someone speaking for them.

The last defendant in Garfield County had 26 citations for driving on a suspended license throughout his life. Recently, he racked up a few more. The prosecutor asked for a day in jail for each of the charges. The man said he's trying to make things right, though, and just hoped to get home to take care of his 2-year-old daughter who has a seizure disorder.

Acey gave the guy 14 days with credit for 14 served. He has heard all the excuses and pleas for sympathy; some stories are true and some aren't.

The courtroom is the place where all else falls, leaving the truth alone to stand. But the real truth is, "You don't ever know," Acey said. "If you have children or you have grandchildren, how do you know when one of them is fudging the truth?"

Circumstantial evidence, actions. The man had turned himself in, thought he had his license reinstated before the last offense and had a clean license for several years before the recent troubles.

None those things mean he wants to get out to take care of his daughter, or that he even has a daughter, but the truth about whether the guy is going to straighten up will come when he either enrolls in a relicensing program or doesn't after his release.

Acey had to call the clerk of the court in Dayton to let them know he was running a little late. He was due on the bench there at 11 a.m. and he wouldn't make it until 11:15 or 11:20.

Travel is a big part of riding circuit, but it keeps things fresh. He has to check in, though, because he recently got a death threat. If he doesn't show up, at least they'll send someone to look for him.

There is a stretch of U.S. Highway 12 between Pomeroy and the Starbuck cut-off Acey calls raptor row. He counts the number of red-tailed hawks he sees. The record is 15; Thursday there were 12.

When he gets to the Columbia County court there are a stack of things for him to sign and a docket of cases to hear - more law in motion.

He covers a few cases and then grabs lunch - a Reuben sandwich while sitting in the corner of a hospital conference room in domestic violence coalition meeting.

Domestic violence was the No. 1 problem when he started and still is. The group is made up of social workers and prosecutors and Acey. They compare notes and try to make sure victims or abusers don't slip through the cracks.

The start of the after-lunch docket was juvenile cases - most didn't like to go to school.

When Acey was a senior at a Catholic high school in Georgia, the head sister took every senior into her office and asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. It was the earliest and most earnest form of guidance counseling.

She looked at young Acey and, as he remembers, said, "You should go to law school, become a lawyer so you can one day be a judge. I think you'd be good at it."

One of his grandfathers was a small-town Minnesota attorney, so Acey called Grandpa Smith and asked him what he thought of the plan.

Through the phone line came his answer: "Why Billy, I think you'd be a fine attorney."

That was enough for him. He went to law school, become an attorney and has now been a judge for the past 25 years.

A lot of stuff happened in between, but those are the headlines.

The first thing Acey does with a truancy case is give the kid homework - he tells them to write an essay about two jobs they would like to have, then he has them fill out a budget for a year to show them that no one can make it on minimum wage.

On Thursday, one teenage boy didn't complete the assignment. Acey was curt, held him in contempt and ordered pen and paper for him to do the work. He was in custody until he finished.

"As long as you get your homework done, you can go home," Acey told him.

Acey went on with other cases as the despondent teen worked.

He came back later and turned it in. He wanted to be a wildland firefighter or bulldozer operator. Acey read announced to the court.

"Get there from here," Acey told the kid as he hoisted the essay smiling like a judicial cheerleader holding a legal-pad pompom. "Go for one of these jobs."

Acey sent the young man on his way.

In the meantime, though, another case of teen boy came through. He was still acting out in school and failed a drug test.

"Yeah, you're going to jail for two weeks," Acey said.

Some cases have their whole future in front of them, some have terrible things behind them.

One of the adult cases later was a man accused of rape.

Acey said he has only seen a handful of what he thought were hopelessly evil people, he said while he was driving raptor row earlier. He doesn't think that many exist.

Drugs and alcohol cause a lot of problems, he said, but most people have good in them.

"The second I quit caring about people in general, whether it's the people accused of the crime or the people affected by it," he said, "that's the day I hang up the robe."

Bloomberg may be contacted at codyb@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2274. Follow him on Twitter @crbloomsburg.